

LutheranWoman

January/February 2006

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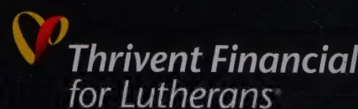
Act Boldly with Generosity
Not-So-Random Acts of Kindness



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Session 6: Act Boldly with Generosity The Greek word *agathosune* is sometimes translated as "goodness," but in the NRSV it is translated as "generosity." Sue Gamelin

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PLUS . . .

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Human Kind

by Kate Sprutta Elliott

I LIVE IN CHICAGO AND I TAKE PUBLIC TRANSIT TO WORK EVERY DAY. ONE MORNING I NOTICED A YOUNG woman on the train. I thought, she's really lovely but that spiky haircut makes her look like a rooster. Not very generous of me, I know. When she got up for her stop, I saw she was carrying a beat-up tan backpack. On the back of it she had written in bold letters: "Humankind. Be both."

Human *and* kind. Sometimes it's hard to be both. By our very nature we have a tendency to judge and hold tight to our own ideas. Sometimes it takes real effort to open our hearts, to approach people with kindness and generosity—especially people who are different from us.

In this issue, you will find two Bible study sessions, one on kindness and one on generosity. These are gifts that the world needs desperately—and we can help. To enhance your study, be sure to check out the articles by Martha Stortz on generosity and by Karen Burgess-Cassler on kindness. Perhaps nowhere is the need for kindness and generosity greater than in situations where we disagree. Mary Mortimore Dossin shares her experience of "journeying together faithfully" through the ELCA's studies on sexuality. She writes, "One thing we know for certain is that we are called to treat one another with kindness and respect no matter what our stance on a particular issue might be."

In January, the church celebrates the feast of the Epiphany, a season of starlight and showing forth—Christ revealed to all people. Don't miss Patricia Lull's article on Epiphany and Audrey Riley's compilation of some of the traditions that surround this festival. Also related to the revelation of the season, Phyllis Anderson reflects on ecumenism and the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity. Does your congregation mark this week in any special way? Maybe your circle could spend a few moments in prayer as Jesus prayed, "that we may all be one" (John 17:21).

In February, as you prepare for Lent, take some time to read Evon O. Flesberg's meditation, "Giving My Lamb for You." She tells us that "Lent is the time for 'coming to Jesus' as they say here in the South; which means . . . being clear and honest about ourselves in relationship to God in Jesus Christ." Think about different ways you might observe Lent this year so that your relationship with Jesus is strengthened and enriched.

Finally, in this issue we begin a new feature called "We Recommend." This page will bring you information about resources for action, advocacy, programs, or further study. We hope you find it helpful as you plan programs.

Kate Sprutta Elliott is editor of *Lutheran Woman Today*.



GIVE US THIS DAY

Fear of Falling

by Marj Leegard

IF YOU FALL, YOUR FRIEND CAN HELP YOU UP. BUT IF YOU FALL WITHOUT HAVING A FRIEND NEARBY, YOU ARE REALLY IN TROUBLE." ECCLESIASTES 4:10 (CEV)

There are names for all sorts of people, and some of us have borne them all. But there is one name that falls upon us without announcement: the *fear of falling down* group. It plagues our dreams at night and our plans in daylight. We wonder, "What if?" Our imaginations carry our questions to their ultimate answers, and we don't like it.

Long ago, there was a meeting of pastors 100 miles from my house. They had asked me to speak, and I agreed. They wanted to hear about ministry in daily life, and I wanted to tell them about it. And so I wrote out my half-hour talk and practiced it until I thought I was ready.

It was a two-hour drive to the meeting place—time enough to worry. Fear crept into my throat. Who did I think I was, to believe I had anything to say to this group? What could I have been thinking to include *this* in my talk? And mercy! That? I started mentally re-working my talk. I crept into the hall as my audience was just finishing devotions. I was next. Suddenly someone in a wheelchair backed out of a row and came toward me. I recognized a friend. I knelt down next to her and she put her arms around my neck and whispered, "Oh boy! Are these people in for a treat!" And then she did a modified wheelie and went back to her place.

The fear in my heart evaporated. My friend's bold kindness did it. A simple wave of her hand when I came in would hardly have calmed me. A whispered "I'm looking forward to it" would not have relieved my distress. She knew that we are all called and ordained in our baptism for ministry in family, work, and communities. And she was bold in her welcome. And her warmth allowed me to share my thoughts without fear.

We are often reticent in our kindnesses. We think of an act of generosity and then pare it down. By the time goodness moves from heart to hands, it has shrunk to something less than bold.

I gave my granddaughter-in-law a little bowl that she had often admired on my shelf. One Christmas Eve she looked for the bowl, and it was gone. She felt a loss as if it had been her own. And then she unwrapped it, and tears of joy ran down both our cheeks. Being kind with boldness means going a step further than is comfortable. Giving a little more than is sensible. Shutting out the cold voice that overrides the boldness of our hearts.

When I was afraid I would fall on my face, my friend picked me up. May you be a friend like that and have a friend like that.

LWT columnist Marj Leegard and her husband, Jerome, live in Detroit Lakes, Minn.

compiled by Audrey Novak Riley from sources including *Lutheran Book of Worship*, *Renewing Worship*, and *Sundays and Seasons*, available from Augsburg Fortress, Publishers (www.augsburgfortress.org)

JANUARY

In 45 B.C., Julius Caesar reorganized the calendar in use in the Roman republic (soon to be an empire stretching from Spain to Asia Minor, and from the English Channel to the Sahara Desert) so that the year started on January 1, not March 1.

The Julian year was a fraction too long—365.25 days instead of 365.24219—enough so that by the 1500s, the calendar was out of synch with the astronomical year by about eleven days. The Gregorian calendar, instituted in 1582, corrected that. Not everyone adopted it right away; England (and the American colonies) didn't adopt it until 1752. See <http://webexhibits.org/calendars/timeline.html> for more.

1

NAME OF JESUS

Every Jewish boy was circumcised and formally named on the eighth day after his birth, and today commemorates that event in Jesus' life. Here at the beginning of his earthly life, he shed blood in obedience to the covenant that he made new upon the cross.

8

BAPTISM OF OUR LORD

As Jesus comes up from the water, the Spirit descends on him and the Father speaks: "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased" (Matthew 3:15). For your devotions today, you might read and pray with the Order for Holy Baptism in *LBW*, pages 121 to 125.

6

EPIPHANY

The word *epiphany* means a manifestation, a revelation. Christians have long celebrated the revelation of Christ to the world (symbolized by the Magi) on this great festival. See page 9 for more.

An old tradition tells us that the visitation of the Magi, the baptism of Jesus, and the wedding at Cana fell on the same date. The hymn, "Songs of Thankfulness and Praise," *Lutheran Book of Worship* (*LBW*) page 90, reflects this tradition beautifully.

The Christmas season ends at sundown today. Epiphany may be observed on either January 6 or the second Sunday after Christmas.

14

EIVIND JOSEPH BERGGRAV, BISHOP OF OSLO

When the Nazis overran Norway in 1940, Bishop Berggrav resisted. On Easter Sunday 1942, he broke house arrest, went to his pulpit, and resigned from the captive state church of Norway simultaneously with most of its pastors. He was arrested that day and placed in solitary confinement. But for the next three years, he was often seen at underground church gatherings because he persuaded his guards to let him out. In April 1945, he escaped from the Nazis for good, also with the help of his guards.

**5 MARTIN LUTHER KING JR.,
RENEWER OF SOCIETY, MARTYR**

King's commitment to racial justice and to nonviolence in pursuit of that goal was a true reflection of the Christian call to service. See ELCA Presiding Bishop Mark Hanson's remarks about King at www.elca.org/bishop/text/020115.html.

**8 THE CONFESSION OF ST. PETER
WEEK OF PRAYER FOR CHRISTIAN
UNITY BEGINS**

Peter's confession that Jesus is "the Christ, the Son of the living God" (Matthew 16:16) puts into words what unites all Christians of every place and time.

21 AGNES, MARTYR

Agnes is one of the martyrs of the early church in Rome. Tradition has it that when the emperor began a new persecution of Christians, this young woman (perhaps only 13 years old) boldly, publicly claimed her faith and was put to death in about the year 304.

**25 THE CONVERSION OF ST. PAUL
WEEK OF PRAYER FOR CHRISTIAN
UNITY ENDS**

Paul's words in Galatians 3:28 ("There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus") embody what we pray for during the week ending today.

**26 TIMOTHY, TITUS, AND SILAS,
MISSIONARIES**

The people honored today and tomorrow were all co-workers with Paul. Read Acts for their stories. Today's three traveled with Paul, spreading the Good News, planting churches, nurturing the seeds of faith.

**27 LYDIA, DORCAS, AND PHOEBE,
WITNESSES TO THE FAITH**

These three heard the Good News and carried it out where they lived: Lydia offered her home as a base for Paul's missionary work; Dorcas made clothes for the needy; Phoebe served the church as a deaconess.

28 THOMAS AQUINAS, TEACHER

Thomas Aquinas was a brilliant theologian. In his time, some scholars were drawn to Aristotle's philosophy; Thomas explained Christian beliefs in Aristotelian terms, proving that faith and philosophy need not be at odds, but can harmonize. His writings were immensely influential and are still studied today. He also wrote hymns that have lived through the ages: Two are in *LBW*.

Late in his life, he had a revelation at the altar. He never described it; he never wrote again. He said, "All that I have written is straw compared to what has been revealed to me." He died in 1274.

FEBRUARY

compiled by Audrey Novak Riley from sources including *Lutheran Book of Worship*, *Renewing Worship*, and *Sundays and Seasons*, available from Augsburg Fortress, Publishers (www.augsburgfortress.org)

February is named for a Roman purification festival that fell during this month.

2

PRESENTATION OF OUR LORD

Forty days after the birth of Jesus, Mary and Joseph presented him in the temple according to Jewish law; see Luke 2:22–38. The canticle of Simeon (“Master, now you are dismissing your servant in peace”) has long been part of night prayer.

14

CYRIL, MONK; METHODIUS, BISHOP; MISSIONARIES

These two brothers worked among the Slavs of southeastern Europe, whose language then had no written form. They developed an alphabet and translated the scriptures and the liturgy into Slavonic, using their Cyrillic alphabet.

18

MARTIN LUTHER, RENEWER OF THE CHURCH

It is an ancient custom to remember saints on the day of their death, the day of their birth into heaven. Martin Luther died on this day in 1546.

25

ELIZABETH FEDDE, DEACONESS

Fedde was sent from Norway to New York to minister to the poor and to Norwegian sailors. She established the Deaconess House in Brooklyn and the Deaconess House and Hospital in Minneapolis. She died in 1921.

26

TRANSFIGURATION OF OUR LORD

Icons of this epiphany (a manifestation of God’s glory in Christ) often show Peter, James, and John falling down in awe, their sandals flying off their feet. Like Moses before the burning bush, they are on holy ground.

28

SHROVE TUESDAY, MARDI GRAS, FASTNACHT, FETTISDAGGEN

In many cultures, this last day before Lent has long been a time for fun and feasting on pancakes and pastries. The custom comes from preparing for the Lenten fast, which, in the old days, was severe: no sweets, no meat, no dairy, no eggs. People wanted to use up the food that wouldn’t keep until Easter, and that’s why we have sweet treats today. *Shrove* is an old English word related to the practice of confessing one’s sins in preparation for Lent. The French word *gras* is related to our word “grease,” which is what we do to a pan before making pancakes. *Fastnacht* means the night before the fast, and many people of German heritage enjoy sweet treats and sociability today. *Fettisdaggen* is when Swedes enjoy *semla*, filled pastries. (In 1771, King Adolf Frederick of Sweden died of digestive troubles after eating fourteen of these.) Many cultures have customs like these. What is observed in your area?



Epiphany

GOD'S LIGHT REVEALED

by Patricia Lull

In many congregations, the colors change with the feast days and seasons of the church year. As a girl, I loved tagging along with my mother when she was on altar guild duty. We would spend a Saturday afternoon at church with other women, removing the colorfully embroidered cloths from the altar, the pulpit, and the lectern, returning them to special closets in the church basement, and then carefully setting out new paraments in their place.

Epiphany is one of the white festivals and seasons of the church year. The brightness of the altar

fabrics offers a visual reminder that Epiphany is a time of joy, a time to ponder God's revelation that sheds light on the darkness of our lives. Epiphany stands amid the other liturgically white days and seasons in the church year.

In the sequence of the church year these white days and seasons include the Incarnation of Our Lord with its celebrations of the Christmas Season, Epiphany, the Baptism of Our Lord, and the Transfiguration of Our Lord; and the Resurrection of Our Lord, with its celebrations of the Easter Season, the Ascension of Our Lord, Holy

Trinity Sunday, and Christ the King Sunday. Holy Trinity is at the beginning and Christ the King is at the end of the long season of green time that comes after the Feast of Pentecost. In many congregations All Saints Sunday is observed in early November, another white festival.

What unique role does Epiphany, celebrated on January 6 (or sometimes the Sunday following) play in such a prestigious line-up? The Bible texts appointed for Epiphany reveal the theological origins of this festival. They include Isaiah 60:1-6, announcing the in-

breaking of God's light upon the world; Ephesians 3:1–12, the announcement of God's grace and favor to all people; and Matthew 2:1–12, the account of the visit of the magi to the infant Jesus.

Christians in the early centuries of the church not only remembered Jesus' resurrection every Sunday when they gathered for worship, they began to weave together a year-long pattern of celebrations that marked important moments in the earthly life of Jesus. This practice served both to lift up and teach the story of God's promise of salvation and to offer particular

moments to highlight the theological richness of God's coming to us in the life of Jesus Christ.

The narrative behind our celebration of Epiphany rests in the familiar story of the visit of those wise, regal magi to the home of the young Jesus in Bethlehem. In the early centuries, this account from Matthew's Gospel was the preferred passage for proclamation in the celebration of the birth of Christ in churches in the Eastern part of the Christian world. Over time, this story came to be set in close proximity to the other story of Jesus' birth in Luke 2, the story

of Mary and Joseph's travels to Bethlehem and the birth in a stable, more widely attended to by churches in the West. By the fourth century, these stories came to be heard in succession during a several-week celebration of God's coming to us in the birth of Jesus.

The account in Matthew was particularly heard as a story of manifestation or revealing of God's presence with us, an epiphany. That theme continues through the lessons appointed for the Sundays that form the rest of the season (or time) after Epiphany. In your own church this January



Epiphany AT HOME

Many cheerful and charming customs have grown up around the great festival of Epiphany. Why not try some of them in your own home?

- When you set up your Christmas nativity, place the three kings far away from the manger and move them a little closer day by day. Today they arrive!
- In Spain and some Latin American countries, the three kings are the ones who bring gifts for children. Before bed on the night before, children set out their shoes with a snack for the kings' camels tucked inside: a bit of hay.
- In Italy, La Befana, a kind old lady with a broom, brings gifts for children. The legend goes that the three kings knocked on her door to ask for directions to the Christ Child's house, but she didn't know the way. They asked her to come look with them, but she said no, she had housework to do. Later she thought better of it and tried to catch up with the kings, but they were long gone. To this day, she travels the world looking for the Christ Child and leaving a little treat for every child she sees, just in case.
- Among many Eastern Christians, Epiphany is a day for a blessing of water, recalling Christ's baptism in

and February, listen for the way the Gospel readings lead the congregation through a series of amazing presentations of who this Jesus, once adored by strangers from afar, turns out to be.

Yet the stories of the day and the season of Epiphany are not just about who Jesus is. For many centuries, Christians have walked alongside these texts, learning from them what it means to honor God's presence or epiphanies in their own lives. The lectionary of the church year, full of feast days and ordinary time, continues to serve this teaching function today.

Much of what we learn in Epiphany has to do with God's mission, which continues to bring light and hope to all peoples. These early weeks of 2006 are a particularly good time for learning about the global mission of the church today. Like this month's Bible study, which calls us to act boldly with kindness, the celebration of Epiphany invites us to discover our own role in that mission. Through us God is still announcing good news of joy and hope and surprising gladness to all kinds of people, close to home and around the world.

Just as I once helped my mother at church, as an adult I have many opportunities to show others that in Christ we have been given a Savior who reveals God's love and grace for all people. So many people in our world are still waiting for that in-breaking of good news. You have that same opportunity, too. And like the magi of old, we will be surprised by what we discover in the process.

Pastor Patricia Lull serves as dean of students at Luther Seminary, St. Paul, Minn.

the Jordan. In Greece and places of Greek heritage, this blessing often takes place at the waterfront. After a short ceremony, a cross is cast into the water. Swimmers dive in to retrieve it and receive a blessing. That custom is clearly suited to mild climates. In Ukraine, where it's cold in January, they do it a little differently. The people build an enormous cross of ice in front of the church and bless a tub of water. However, some hardy souls do take a dip as part of the festivities. Ukrainian president Viktor Yushchenko was photographed climbing out of a hole in the ice of a frozen lake after his Epiphany 2004 swim.

In England and many other European countries, Twelfth Night is time for a party with games and all sorts of topsy-turvy fun. (Shakespeare's comedy *Twelfth Night* was probably written for Queen Elizabeth I's party in 1601.) A cake is baked with

a dried bean inside; the one who gets the piece with the bean is the king or queen, and gets to throw next year's Twelfth Night party.

- Many people bless the house (office, dorm, hospital, parish house, and so on) at Epiphany. People pray a blessing in each room of the house, and end by chalking the numerals of the year with crosses and the letters "C M B" above the main door (20 + C + M + B + 06). The letters stand for either the traditional names of the three kings (Caspar, Melchior, and Balthazar) or for *Christus Mansionem Benedicat*, "Christ bless this house." Our neighbors in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada offer a lovely home liturgy at www.worship.ca/docs/I_chalk.html.

Audrey Novak Riley is associate editor of LWT.



by Phyllis Anderson

Kitchen Table Ecumenism

Sharon had tried to organize a neighborhood gathering to welcome the woman who had moved in across the street. She baked muffins and brewed coffee enough for a dozen. But only the new neighbor and Sharon's old friend Marge showed up. It seemed silly to go into the living room where the china cups were set out, so they poured their coffee into mugs and sat down at the kitchen table.

The conversation skipped from schools to doctors to hairdressers as the women tried to

help their new neighbor, Susan, get settled. Then the conversation turned to churches.

The silence was awkward as each tried to judge whether religion was a safe topic. Marge went to an evangelical community church and Sharon was a Lutheran. Actually Marge and Sharon, through an unspoken agreement, hadn't talked much about their own churches through the years.

But Susan persisted. She fought back tears as she shared how much it meant for her priest to be with her during her daughter's losing

battle with cancer and the sorrowful days that followed her death. Leaving the small Episcopal parish that had loved her through that terrible time was the hardest part of moving. She was eager to find a new church home where she could again experience hope and comfort. The sense of being connected with God and God's people around the communion table had been her one sure anchor.

Marge and Sharon were at first unsure how to enter into the holy space Susan had opened up at the kitchen table. They each

offered to take Susan to visit their churches, and the conversation could have ended there. Instead they responded to how Susan's faith and particular denominational tradition made a difference in her life. Before they knew it, they were telling their own stories about the ways in which their faith experiences had affected them.

Jesus was present in all their stories—there in the midst of them, just as he promises to be whenever two or three are gathered in his name. Despite their different faith traditions, they experienced being one in Christ. The unity these women felt around the kitchen table seemed more exciting than the familiar belonging in their own congregations. They wished that others could share in this vision of Christianity that is richer than anything that divides the church.

This ecumenical vision is realized whenever diverse believers gather in Christ's name and dare to tell their truth and to hear the truth of others. Jesus is there in the midst of them, breathing his

Spirit into their separate hearts, drawing them into his one body. The familiar verse, "For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them" (Matthew 18:20), is the theme for this year's celebration of the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity.

During the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity, many will have the opportunity to participate in festive ecumenical services. Countless ecumenical organizations at the local, national, and international levels bring Christians together to help the poor and to advocate for justice. People of faith regularly experience the unity of the church when they come together across their divisions in common worship and shared service.

Scholars have spent decades in ecumenical dialogue to increase understanding and to forge agreements among churches that have been separated or at odds with each other for hundreds of years. At the 2005 ELCA Churchwide Assembly in Orlando, Florida, delegates voted to enter into a relationship

of interim Eucharistic sharing with the United Methodist Church. This is one step toward the kind of full communion agreement the ELCA enjoys with the Episcopal Church, the Presbyterian Church (USA), the United Church of Christ, the Reformed Church in America, and the Moravian Church.

This latest agreement with the United Methodist Church means that we are not only allowed, but encouraged to worship with our Methodist neighbors. We are to study together, share the deep resources of our respective traditions, and explore new ways to work together for justice in the world while proclaiming Christ. At the simplest and perhaps the most profound level, you are urged to invite a Methodist friend to join you at your kitchen table, to share your faith, and to discover the unity that is yours whenever two or three gather in his name.

Phyllis Anderson is the president of Pacific Lutheran Theological Seminary in Berkeley, Calif.

The Week of Prayer for Christian Unity is traditionally observed in mid-January, from the festivals of the Confession of St. Peter (January 18) to the Conversion of St. Paul (January 25). To learn more about the Week of Prayer and find resources that can help your circle or congregation plan ways to observe the week, go to www.elca.org/ecumenical.

Telling Stories

A BOLD ACT OF FAITH

by Brendolyn Miller



To say that we must act boldly could imply that we have obstacles and challenges to overcome. To say that we must act boldly might also suggest that we have decided to rewrite our personal story and that we have the drive to make that new story a part of our everyday lives. That is a bold act of faith.

I rewrote my own story to say that this middle-aged, Black, Lutheran clergywoman would enter the doctoral program in pastoral theology at Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary in Evanston, Illinois. For me, this was truly a bold act of faith.

My grandparents and great-grandparents, who relocated to the urban North from a rural area in southern Mississippi, used stories to nurture their family. Whenever there was a thunderstorm, they would turn off the lights and unplug the electrical appliances and gather the family together to tell their stories. As we “let God do God’s work,” my grandparents would share their stories of ancestors, stories of captivity as slaves, tales about family members, lessons they’d learned along the way, and even some myths. They would encourage us to find our own stories by looking at our lives and how we were living them. They taught us to have faith in ourselves and in God. They used what seemed like simple

and insignificant stories as vital tools for defining life and faith. And they stressed education as key to personal development in this world.

I entered seminary at the age of 40. Obviously, I didn't show up straight after college with a guitar and a dog, singing "Kum-ba-ya." Beginning with my first seminary course, we were constantly asked to share our personal stories with the rest of the class. I remember thinking, "Oh Lord, here we go, Touchy-Feely 101."

I cannot begin to express how those simple exercises eventually transformed my life, deepened my faith, and became the core of my ministry in pastoral care. It would take me 46 years and five degrees to get back to what my grandparents taught me when I was five years old. In learning to boldly tell my story, I was beginning to examine the situations and patterns in my life. I was learning to understand how my story is informed by the Gospel. I was forced to acknowledge the lessons of my life experiences and to recognize what I had yet to learn. I was beginning to uncover the ways that God interacts in my life, through the stories and dreams that I chose to share and the stories that I chose to forget.

A growing trend in pastoral

care and psychology is to study how and why human beings create stories to make sense of our world and our relationship with God. Stories are created and stored in our memory, but not all stories happened exactly as we remember. And many of our most profound stories only come to light when we awaken them by writing them down. It has been said that we write to think, not think to write.

Womanist theology, which takes as its starting point the stories of African American women, insists that the stories of all God's people are vital for the complete telling of God's interaction with humanity. This means that regardless of our race, creed, or color, our stories are part of God's story. The stories entrusted to us by our mothers and grandmothers must be recorded and shared with women who desperately need to hear them.

Our stories are all that survive us after our short journey on earth. Our stories are the symbolic telling of who we loved, who loved us, what was meaningful to us, how we lived our faith, and whether we were able to maintain our love in the face of life's obstacles and challenges.

Above my desk is a quote from poet and activist Audre Lorde. When asked what advice she would give the next generation of

Black women writers (and women writers in general), she said:

"Not to be afraid of difference. To be real, tough, loving. And to recognize each other. I can tell them not to be afraid to feel and not to be afraid to write about it. Even if you are afraid, do it anyway because we learn to work when we are tired, so we can learn to work when we are afraid. Silence never brought us anything. Survive and teach; that's what we've got to do and to do it with joy."

As we tell and write our stories, we break the silences that nurture abuse and dysfunction. As we tell and write our new stories, we are able to dream and define God's purpose for ourselves. This is a bold act of faith.

Gwendolyn Miller is a pastoral care theologian who has recently completed her Ph.D. in pastoral theology at Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary in Evanston, Ill. Pastor Miller is serving as interim pastor at Zion Lutheran Church of Avalon Park on the South Side of Chicago. She plans to write novels based on issues specific to pastoral care.

Hall, Joan Wylie. *Conversations with Audre Lorde*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2004; p. 100.



GIVING

My Lamb for You

by Evon O. Flesberg

I began my Lenten meditation last August. My contemplation of Jesus' death and resurrection, the cross and empty tomb started well before Advent and the celebration of our Lord's birth at Christmas. The green days of Pentecost still prevailed. In the heat and humidity of a summer's day, a story in our local newspaper plunged me into the heart of the Lenten mystery.



Gina's lamb

I read about 11-year-old Gina Locke. Her older brother's friend, a former neighbor who was as welcome in her home as a member of the family, had been seriously injured. To help him, Gina decided to sell her lamb, Champ, at the local fair. She used her creativity, making a leaflet that told about the friend and her decision to sell Champ, and asked for additional donations.

Champ was sold twice. The first company paid for Champ and gave him back to Gina to sell again. Then another company paid for the lamb. Gina's gift of Champ raised \$4,691.25. I tried to imagine being the one receiving Gina's generosity, knowing that the sacrifice of her beloved friend with his woolly coat was for me. I would be humbled, awe-struck, overwhelmed.

The boldly kind and generous Gina said, "I'll give my lamb for you." Could you—would you—do the same?

The Lenten Lamb of God

Gina's action led me to ponder the Lamb of our Lenten journey. Jesus is the Lamb of God, the one given to us in love by the Lord of the universe.

Ask some people, "What's your favorite Bible verse?" and John 3:16 is bound to surface. "For God so loved the world . . ." God so loves the world, is passionate about the world, is ever blessing and sustaining the world: the world—you, me, the neighbors, our enemies, those unknown to us.

God so loved the world that God gave God's only Son. I have a hard time comprehending giving a child, let alone an only child. Yet, God gave Jesus to the world to love the world, to bind the world to God's own being. For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life" (John 3:16). Out of God's loving generosity, we are given life with God now and in eternity.

The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world

The death of Gina's lamb yielded money for the healing of a friend. The death and resurrection of the Lamb of God are for the life and healing of the world.

When John the Baptist saw Jesus coming toward him, he announced, "Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!" (John 1:29) The next day John was still excited about Jesus. When he watched Jesus walk by, John exclaimed, "Look, here is the Lamb of God!" (1:35–36) Notice the exclamation points in the Scripture quotations. John was charged up about Jesus for the world's sake.

What are we to make of this introduction of Jesus? The writers of the notes of the *New Interpreter's Study Bible* offer these insights:

1:29 Jesus appears for the first time in the Gospel, but does not speak. The focus is on John's testimony about him. *Lamb of God* evokes the Passover lamb, the symbol of Israel's deliverance (Exodus 12:1–13). *Sin* is singular, and emphasizes the world's collective alienation from God and one another, rather than a catalog of human sins. (Italics in original, p. 1909)

The Lamb's gift is deliverance out of alienation from God and one another. Recall the Exodus story of the Israelites' deliverance out of slavery in Egypt. For 430 years they had been enslaved. God heard their plea and gave them instructions on how to prepare to leave. Imagine the intensity of the situation when someone is issuing orders for an evacuation. God instructed Moses and Aaron to tell the people how to select a lamb, swab the doorposts and lintels of their houses with the blood of this unblemished lamb, and how to cook the lamb. The people were to be ready to move—"your loins girded, your sandals on your feet, and your staff in your hand; and you shall eat it hurriedly. It is the passover of the Lord" (Exodus 12:11).

The blood marked the houses of the Israelites. The angel of death passed over and the firstborn of the Israelites were not killed. The Egyptians begged them to leave. The Israelites were free. Jesus is the Lamb of God for us. He delivers us from our bondage by his death. His willingness to love unto death itself sets us free. Our sin, our alienation from God, is overcome.

The Lamb sets us free

Lent is the time for "coming to Jesus," as they say here in the South; which means, as I understand it, being clear and honest about ourselves in relationship to God in Jesus Christ. It is a time for giving up

all that we have set between ourselves and God as well as between ourselves and others.

What is between God and yourself? What occupies your mind? Are you worried about your health? Will you have enough money? Are you accumulating "things"? Are you worried about what will become of the kids and grandkids? Will the stepchildren call when you're old? Worry and anxiety isolate us and deplete our joy in knowing that God sustains us every day; and most importantly, cause us to forget that even death will not separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus.

Maybe you think your sinfulness is larger than God's ability to forgive in Jesus Christ. Is there shame or guilt in your life that you need to confess and have forgiven this Lenten season? Seek out your pastor for private confession and forgiveness.

How are your relationships? Do others know the love of God through you? If a relationship is harming you, now is the time for you to find a pastoral counselor, pastor, or friend to help you.

Lent calls us to God's mercy, to renewal, to hope for ourselves and the world. The loving God gives the Lamb to set you free.

The Lamb makes God known

Gina's action of giving her lamb gives us a sense of who she is as a person. We know her courage and compassion. The giving of Jesus makes God known. In the first chapter of John it is written, "No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father's heart, who has made him known" (1:18). God gave Jesus to reveal the heart of God.

Consider all that Jesus did. He healed the sick, restored the demon-possessed, fed the hungry, offered living water, raised the dead, blessed caregivers. The list goes on. In *all* his loving actions, including giving his own life, Jesus makes God known to us. We sing

with joy, "Yes, Jesus Loves Me" and "What a Friend We Have in Jesus" and know that God cares about each of us and the world.

And we are called to make God known—to the hungry, the thirsty, the poor, the stranger, the sick, and the imprisoned. The vulnerable are everywhere. Wars rage. Natural disasters destroy. Millions are dying of AIDS. Will the world be able to sing because of your kindness and generosity? Will you be bold?

Lamb of God—I give of my abundance

Oscar and Clarence Engen farmed in South Dakota. With the money they earned from their land, they established a seminary scholarship. The summer after my first year at Wartburg Seminary, I did my clinical pastoral education at a state hospital for people with developmental disabilities. This experience blessed me profoundly, but the stipend it paid and the money I earned preaching on weekends was meager. Therefore I had applied for the Engen Scholarship.

It was my birthday. In among the cards that came was a letter from South Dakota. My heart raced. I opened the letter, only to read that I had not been selected. My heart sank. A couple more cards. Another letter from South Dakota! Isn't one rejection enough? This letter said that my need had been placed before the body of Christ and I would be receiving some money. I wrote back telling them that this part of the body of Christ was delighted!

Even though the Engen brothers are deceased, their land generates income that still funds the scholarship some 27 years later. Could you—would you—give like that?

You might be saying, "I don't have anything valuable to give, I don't have any land or a trust fund." There are many ways to be generous. Open your heart and mind. Let God fill your imagination.

Lamb of God—I give what I do not yet have

Sister Eileen Pistor, RSM, gave what she did not yet have. She had a client about whom she said, "The single mother was struggling with an addiction, had a minimum-wage position, and was in despair as to where she could get help. There was no such place." Sister Eileen set to work. She gathered financial and community support, collaborated with other agencies, and assembled, as Sister Eileen has said, a board of directors that "worked."

On November 23, 1998, the House of Mercy in Nashville welcomed its first residents. Its mission is to provide a home and services for homeless mothers and their children. Everything from substance abuse recovery and training in financial planning and saving, to training in parenting skills and spiritual enrichment is offered to help these families toward stability and self-sufficiency.

Now there are three houses. Sister Eileen had the vision to go where she had not yet been. She was not wealthy, was no longer young, was not an expert on addictions, and had not borne children. But Sister Eileen trusted that God would bless her dream. She gave her vision and faithfully worked to bring it into reality. Could you—would you—give like that?

God so loved the world that God gave Jesus—the Lamb of God. Gina gave her lamb. Oscar and Clarence gave from the abundance of their land. Sister Eileen gave what she did not yet possess. Could you—would you—give like that?

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HEALTH WISE

New Year, New You

by Molly M. Ginty

YOU PLEDGED TO BEHAVE THROUGH THE HOLIDAYS. THEN CAME THE CHRISTMAS CAKE. YOU HAD HOPED to shed the extra pounds by the New Year. But a dizzying array of diet plans—from Atkins to the Zone—left you baffled about where to begin.

You may be tempted to try a fad diet—as tempted as you were by that third slice of pumpkin pie. But health experts caution that the \$42 billion diet industry may be only sugar-coating its claims.

In 2004, a University of Washington study found that “yo-yo dieting” can damage a woman’s immune system, and a University of California at Berkeley study revealed that women who diet repeatedly are likely to end up obese. Last January, a University of Pennsylvania review found that commercial weight-loss programs don’t work. And last June, a review from the University of South Florida College of Medicine found that diet drugs are “ineffective” if used alone without lifestyle changes.

With 62 percent of women age 20 to 74 overweight, and about half of these obese, health advocates are urging women to drop pills and fad diets and instead follow weight-loss plans that actually work.

Research shows that being overweight boosts a woman’s risk of high blood pressure, high cholesterol,

heart disease, diabetes, infertility, osteoarthritis, and breast cancer. “For the sake of our health, we must start choosing apples over apple pie,” says Madelyn Fernstrom, director of the Weight Management Center at the University of Pittsburgh Medical Center.

How can you shed the holiday fat and keep it off for good?

Physicians say one healthy option is to follow the new dietary guidelines from the Washington-based Department of Health and Human Services. Issued a year ago, these recommendations (found at www.healthierus.gov/dietaryguidelines) are the first government-issued guidelines to stress weight loss. They urge Americans to eat nine servings of fruits and vegetables daily (versus the five previously recommended) and to get 60 to 90 minutes of moderate exercise (versus the 30 minutes recommended before).

“If you’re trying to shed pounds by modifying your food intake, it helps to not only follow these guidelines, but to also know a few numbers,” says John Foreyt, M.D., director of the Behavioral Medicine Research Center at Baylor College of Medicine in Houston. “In order to maintain your current weight, you need to consume 10 calories per pound of weight each day. If you weigh 150

For the sake of our health, we must start choosing apples over apple pie.

pounds, for instance, you need 1,500 calories a day to stay there. If you eat less, you'll start losing weight. And it's healthiest to lose it slowly. If you consume 3,500 fewer calories per week or 500 fewer per day, you can lose a pound each week—which is safer on your body than going on any crash diet."

With 60 to 90 minutes of exercise per day, you can also make slow, steady changes. "You can get the exercise you need in parts, by taking a series of brisk walks or swimming for short stretches," says Foreyt. "You can also look at your lifestyle for ways to be more active. That could mean walking up the stairs instead of taking the elevator or parking at the far end of the lot and walking."

A note of caution to diet and gym junkies: Even if you did overdo it at Christmas, there may be no need for you to make changes. It may be true that obesity is the seventh leading cause of preventable death in the United States. But it's also true that mainstream culture is spreading dangerous messages about body size. Glossy magazines peddle razor-thinness, airlines charge heavy customers for two seats instead of one, and three popular television shows (*Fat Actress*, *The Biggest Loser*, and *Flab to Fab*) mock people who are overweight. As a result, say health advocates, many American women fear they are fat or that their weight is a problem when that is not the case.

To check how your weight really stacks up, you can gauge your body mass index (a measure

of weight relative to height) by clicking on <http://nhlbisupport.com/bmi>. Having a BMI above 18.5 and below 25 is generally considered normal. But this varies from person to person and depends on your bone structure, age, and health history. Check with your doctor if you're concerned about your BMI or are considering a weight-loss plan. And always remember to care for your body regardless of its shape and size.

"Whether you're heavy or thin, real health doesn't come from conforming to society's standards of acceptable body size," says Connie Sobczak, founder of The Body Positive, a health advocacy organization in Berkeley, California. "Real health comes from eating a variety of well-balanced foods and stopping when you're full. It comes from exercising for the joy of it and from letting your body's wisdom guide you."

Molly M. Ginty lives in New York. Her work has appeared in *Ms.*, *Marie Claire*, *Redbook*, and *Women's eNews*.

FOR MORE INFORMATION:

American Obesity Association
www.obesity.org

The Body Positive
www.thebodypositive.org

WHATEVER STAGE OF LIFE YOU'RE IN, and whether you're physically fit or living with chronic illness, you can find ways to be a wise steward of your health and well-being. Our health and wholeness are important keys to responding to God's call for us and acting boldly on that call. That's why Women of the ELCA have embarked on a new health initiative for the 2005–2008 triennium: Raising Up Healthy Women and Girls. This ongoing column represents our commitment to the issue of women's health.



{still}

by Mary Mortimore Dossin

JOURNEYING TOGETHER FAITHFULLY

Chicago was my mother's town, and she knew the inner mysteries of the grand Marshall Field's department store on State Street as well as she knew the inventories of her own neat closets. When she took my sister Ann and me shopping, we each grabbed a handful of the flared back of her gray winter coat and followed her through the store, clinging like burrs on a sweater. We trusted her guidance as we wove through the crowds, from the basement sale racks, to girls' clothing, to the massive lounge full of brown leather sofas, to the elegant and spacious marble restrooms, to the Veranda Room, where we ate lunch with other shoppers. Ann and I would have been lost if we had ever let go of that coat.

I don't remember when those excursions ended, but they were certainly over when I left home to attend Valparaiso University more than 40 years ago. By then I had begun to doubt my mother as an unerring guide through life. I remember the college president's sermon at Christmas Vespers the night

before we headed home for winter break: "You have discovered things here that may challenge what you learned in your home and in your church. Be gentle with those to whom you are returning. They started you on the path to faith, which is a wondrous thing to have done. Respect what they gave you, and be humble about your new knowledge."

Some of the values my mother imparted I cling to as tightly as I clung to her woolen coat when I was a child: Take care of your family, nurture friendships, keep an orderly home, trust in God, go to church, help others. Those are enduring values for me. On the other hand, I have let go of some other things my mother taught me. I don't believe that everything worth doing is worth doing well. I no longer believe that if you can't say anything nice, you shouldn't say anything at all. Most significantly, I have abandoned her view of the role of women in marriage, remembering how she failed to protect herself and my sister and me from our father's anger.



These personal memories haunted me during the six weeks I spent with several other members of my church studying *Journey Together Faithfully, Part Two: The Church and Homosexuality*. The study was remarkable for its thoroughness and balance, and I completed it with more understanding and respect for the complex variety of viewpoints on this issue.

Here's the main thing I learned: The church is always in a process of "moral deliberation and discernment." As individuals and in congregation, we don't take in without question everything handed down to us by the authorities in our lives: our parents, our governments, our churches. This is nowhere more true than in our approach to Scripture. As a longtime friend and pastor once said to me, Scripture may be inerrant, but our interpretation of it never is. Humility must accompany our deliberations on such moral issues as homosexuality and the church.

The fundamental disagreement is about which rules are laws that are true for all time, and which rules may be changed with new knowledge or circumstances. As the title of the study implies, faithful people can hold different opinions. One thing we know for certain is that we are called to treat one another with kindness and respect no matter what our stance on a particular issue might be.

A light bulb went on for me when I read the statement that creation is not complete and we are part of the continuing work (*Journey Together Faithfully*, page 13). Our faith and understanding are not static; they are always in process. For example, today we look back at the abolition of slavery, woman suffrage, and civil rights as causes that are so fundamentally and obviously right that it is hard to believe that the previous status quo was once accepted, even by faithful Christians, as "the way things are."

Scripture itself is evidence of this. Clearly, we no longer live in Old Testament ways. Polygamy is just

one example. Some biblical accounts present without comment actions that are abhorrent to us. Lot, who was later saved by God with his family from the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, offered his virgin daughters as substitutes to the men who demanded that he make his guests, angels, available for rape. Abraham, commended and blessed by God, led his son Isaac up the mountain to kill him as a sacrifice. If a ram hadn't been entangled in a bush at the last minute, Abraham would be guilty today not only of child abuse but of premeditated murder. His defense that God told him to do it would brand him a lunatic.

What are we to make of these stories? Perhaps that we are doing things now that our children and grandchildren will deplore. The next big moral issue we might face is the treatment of animals that are part of our food supply. My son Toby experienced this when he worked for a week at the local chicken farm. He won't talk about it, but his repugnance, I believe, was not just esthetic but ethical. He hasn't touched chicken since.

At the Churchwide Assembly last August, two major resolutions under consideration were whether the church should bless same-sex unions and roster people in such unions. The ELCA prepared for the vote on these resolutions with careful study, prayer, respectful dialogue, and input from a great variety of sources. The decision that there be no change for now in our church's practices is put into perspective by the overwhelming vote (851–127) to find ways to “live together faithfully in the midst of disagreements.” We are still journeying together faithfully, and as we do so, I will continue to ponder several statements from the study related to the issue of homosexuality and the church:

“A principle of our Lutheran heritage is that our witness to the gospel and the teachings of the Church

arise out of an ongoing process of study and discernment. We continually need to examine our teachings and practice and be open to appropriate change” (*Journey Together Faithfully*, page 20).

“This moral deliberation is part of our calling in Baptism. It continues when we bring the Bible into dialogue with science and an understanding of life that is grounded in reason. Reason and its use are a gift of God. Of course, reason and scientific research have limits; they cannot determine what is ultimately a matter of faith and morals. However, they can help us better understand the human situation and thereby discern how the Word of God helps us understand what is good” (*Journey Together Faithfully*, page 27).

A member of my study group phrased the question this way: Is God calling us to change, or is the world calling us to change? It's an issue with which the church must continually grapple.

I respect my mother's path of living God's will to the best of her understanding, though I no longer accept the submission that she saw as her duty. In fact, the *Journey Together Faithfully* study points out that the role of women is one area in which the church's understanding has changed (pages 20–21). Paul's directive that women should keep silent in churches is no longer seen as normative in the ELCA. Women first became Sunday school teachers, then church council members, then pastors, and now serve as bishops.

The question of which commands in Scripture are time-bound and culture-specific and which are enduring and universal will be with the church forever. The study asserts that a fundamental divide is between those who consider the current disagreement to be about moral judgments and those who see it as a disagreement about core doctrine (*Journey Together Faithfully*, pages 34–35).

My own prayer as the church continues to discern God's will on this issue is that "persistent respectful listening and unceasing prayer" (*Report*, page 2) will prevail. This wish is expressed in the closing prayer of session five in the *Journey Together Faithfully* study guide:

"Good and gracious God, giver of all good gifts, we thank you for the gift of each other in the priesthood of all believers. Sustain us in that calling. In our moral deliberations give us discerning minds eager for your truth. In the often-confusing patterns of our changing world, be our guide. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen."

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The documents mentioned are available for free on the Web: www.elca.org/faithfuljourney.

Journey Together Faithfully, Part Two: The Church and Homosexuality, 2003, is also available in a print version from Augsburg Fortress; call 800-328-4648.



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Act Boldly with

Generosity



christians as a people possessed

by Martha E. Stortz

You'd give someone the shirt off your back," one locker-room buddy teased another after water aerobics class. "But then you'd be arrested for creating a public disturbance." We took stock of Susan's ampleness—and burst out laughing. The loudest laugh rose from our full-bodied friend herself, as generous with her laughter as with everything else. We all walked out together. I watched Susan rumble away in a car that had seen at least a decade on the road, while the rest of us hopped into the latest that Detroit and Tokyo had to offer. As we went our separate ways, I reflected on the exchange. Objectively, Susan had less than the rest of us in terms of salary and status. She lived on a schoolteacher's pay; she rented rather than owned—and we saw her bathing suits sag after seasons of use. Yet, Susan would give you the shirt off her back. She lived an abundance that contrasted sharply with our anxiety over making ends meet, repairing the house, and squirreling away enough for the future. Susan embodied generosity.

As I turned into my driveway, I realized that Jesus had Susan in mind when he said: "to all those who have, more will be given, and they will have an abundance; but from those who have nothing,

even what they have will be taken away" (Matthew 25:29). Our banner put the whole passage in a new light. Jesus was not making some strange and punishing prediction, nor was he dictating a regressive divine economy that would give tax breaks to the rich while bleeding the poor dry. Rather, he was stating a simple fact: A generous person feels overwhelmed with abundance. She is free to share her possessions. In contrast, the ungenerous person feels anxious about what she has. In her mind, her possessions—whether emotional, spiritual, or material—are under constant siege. She lives in a state of scarcity, and she hoards what little she has, lest "even what she has be taken away."

I offer this locker-room story as a parable of generosity, one that invites us to see generosity itself as a gift that keeps on giving. In seeing generosity as a gift of the Spirit, we are freed *from* our possessions and freed *for* belonging to Christ. Finally, as we pattern our giving on Christ's gift, we step into a divine circle of generosity.

possessed by
our possessions

Ancient words from Mount Sinai name the biggest threat to Christian generosity: "I am the LORD your God . . . ; you shall have no

other gods before me" (Exodus 20:2–3). The commandment refers to the various gods and goddesses that people of the ancient world worshiped: the bloody god Moloch, the fecund fertility goddess Astarte, the beaked Egyptian goddess Isis, and so many others. But we fool ourselves into thinking that idols are a thing of the past. If we rummage through our anxiety closets, we can find plenty of others that threaten to enthrall us.

Martin Luther located these other gods by following our heartstrings. In explaining the first commandment in his *Large Catechism*, he found the pulse of idolatry: "That to which your heart clings and entrusts itself is . . . really your god." Our possessions tug at us, and we stand shoulder to shoulder with the great biblical worry warts: "Will moth or rust infest my harvest?" "Will thieves make off with my profit?" "Will the stock market uptick or downturn?" "Will people like me?" Anxiety turns the heart in on itself (Luther's *cor incurvatus in se*), transforming possessions into gods.

Jesus knew all too well the obsessive power of earthly treasures to enthrall. For this reason, he repeated over and over again to anyone who would listen: "Be not anxious." He knew that possessions gradually take over their

owners: People become possessed by their possessions.

An old fable illustrates this by describing how trappers catch monkeys for export to zoos around the country. First, trappers dry a gourd, drill a small hole in the side, and fill the hollow gourd with sweet nuts. Then they hang the gourd in a tree and wait. Without fail, a monkey comes, reaches a little hand into the gourd, grabs a fistful of nuts—and finds that he cannot pull his nut-filled hand out. While the monkey twists and turns and tries to get away, the trapper bags him.

According to the story, the trapper knows that the monkeys will not let go of their treats. If they would only let go, they could run free. But the monkeys desperately hold on.

Generosity is God's way of teaching us to unclench our fists. God intends us to move through life with open hands. The inheritance from Grandmother, the refund from the IRS, the paycheck that rolls in every two weeks: Are these entitlements? Just rewards? Hard-earned wages? Or gifts? How can we receive these gifts with

open hands, rather than anxiously clenching our fists around them?

A people possessed

The most vivid healings in the New Testament involve demonic possession. Again and again, Jesus rebuked demons and commanded them to find another home. He kicked out the thousands of demons inhabiting a Gerasene man, and the spirits moved into a herd of pigs, stampeding them into the sea (Mark 5:1–13). In casting out demons, Jesus repossessed the man, claiming him for his rightful owner. These healing stories reach across the centuries to teach us a valuable lesson about possessions: They teach us who we really are by showing us *whose* we really are. We are a people possessed!

When we gather in the name of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, we confess our rightful ownership. We testify to whom we rightfully belong. The apostle Paul put this new membership quite bluntly: “you belong to Christ, and Christ belongs to God” (1 Corinthians 3:23). We become

part of Christ's body in baptism; we feed on that body through the Lord's Supper. Membership in that body changes everything: We can give of ourselves because Christ gave himself. Paul tells the Christians at Corinth how to feast on this body: “For I received from the Lord what I also handed on to you . . .” (1 Corinthians 11:23). The implication is clear: “Therefore, you should give what you have so abundantly received.” Christ's generosity patterns our own, and we are freed to live life abundantly. Citing Jesus' command in his final meal, the Words of Institution, Paul places Christ's gift of his body and blood at the heart of Christian generosity.

Martin Luther makes a similar connection. He faced his own dilemma of abundance and scarcity. In the medieval world, priests and members of religious orders played a key role in caring for the poor. Priests and religious houses dispensed alms, and the priest in each village knew who needed help. With the dissolution of religious orders in the Reformation, an elaborate welfare system

generosity is god's way of teaching us to unclench our fists.

collapsed. What would happen to the poor? Luther needed a reformed welfare system for the reformed church, and he turned to Paul's table etiquette for the Corinthians. He commended to his own congregations the ancient practice of gathering food and material goods in the church. In addition, he appointed a new priesthood in charge of caring for the poor: the priesthood of all believers.

If we accept Luther's designation as members in a priesthood of all believers, we assume the responsibilities of that role. As Christians, we should be particularly attentive to the poor in our midst. Our belonging in the body of Christ means nothing less. Nourished and empowered by the body of Christ, we are freed to move into the world in lives of joyful service.

A divine circle of generosity
In a small fresco entitled "Charity" in the Scrovegni Chapel in the Italian city of Padua, the 14th-century artist Giotto paints a full-bodied woman framed in a doorway. She reminds me of Susan, both in her figure and her generosity. Her right hand encircles a bowl filled with fruit; her left reaches up to a haloed man who leans down to her from a corner of the doorframe

with outstretched hands. In his hands and in hers are ripe pomegranates. But who is giving what to whom?

Perhaps the woman offers fruit to the man leaning down to her, and we turn to words from Matthew's Gospel for its intended meaning. Jesus tells of a great king who commends his people for feeding him, giving him drink, clothing him, and welcoming him. The people are stunned. They cannot comprehend that this royal personage clothed in majesty had ever been naked, thirsty, or shunned. Then the king explains: "Just as you did it to one of the least of these . . . , you did it to me" (Matthew 25:40). If this text interprets Giotto's fresco, then the woman is giving fruit to someone in need, who turns out to be Christ himself.

But perhaps Christ is giving fruit to the woman. Then the apostle Paul captures the artist's meaning. In speaking of Christ, he breaks out in praise: "Thanks be to God for his indescribable gift!" (2 Corinthians 9:15). If this text interprets the painting, Christ bestows fruit on a woman whose bowl he has already filled to overflowing. Christ not only *gives* the gift, Christ *is* the gift.

Which text better interprets the artist's intent? It's impossible

to ask Giotto to tell us, but I suspect both interpretations ring true to the spirit of generosity. The artist captures a divine circle of giving. We give from abundance because we give what we have first been given. A familiar offertory prayer puts Giotto's message into words: "We offer with joy and thanksgiving what you have first given us, ourselves, our time, and our possessions, signs of your gracious love."

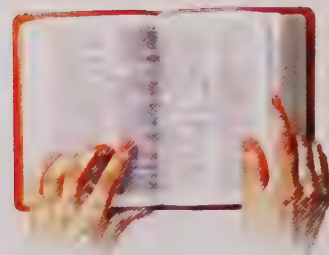
We can only step into that circle of divine generosity with open hands, for we can neither give nor receive with clenched fists. On his deathbed, Luther remarked that we are all beggars. The remark was striking, and it puzzled the crowd at his bedside. But Luther wanted to leave his loved ones with the image of open hands. We move through life with open hands, hands outstretched for the hand of the neighbor. Generosity is God's way of freeing us *from* our possessions and freeing us *for* the wonder of creation. All of life is a gift: May we be generous in passing it on.

Martha E. Stortz is professor of historical theology and ethics at Pacific Lutheran Theological Seminary, Berkeley, Calif., and the author of *A World According to God* (Jossey-Bass, 2004).

Session 5

Act Boldly with Kindness

by Sue Gamelin



LET'S TALK

Tell the group about a kind act you witnessed recently by completing the sentence, "I watched an act of kindness happen when"

Defining Kindness

Just what is kindness? The word *kindness* seems to be hard to define—but we know it when we see it.

We have reached the fifth benefit that Apostle Paul names in Galatians 5:22–23 as the fruit of the Spirit. Those benefits presented as the Spirit's fruit are in stark contrast to the "works of the flesh" that Paul lists just before verse 22. Paul's list of fleshly works in 5:19–21 tells the sordid story of our self-destruction and our contribution to the destruction of our sisters and brothers. None of us is free of those self-absorbed moments when we harm ourselves and others. The odor of wrongdoing clings to us as we confess that we are in bondage to sin and cannot free ourselves.

But God can free us. Verses 22 and 23 come as a beautiful, Spirit-driven wind, dispelling the stench that we have created. Listen to the benefits that rise from the mist when God's baptismal waters splash over our heads and into our lives. Paul writes, "By contrast, the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace,

patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control." Yes, that is us, too. God, who is faithful and just, forgives all our sins, and then breathes into us new life and new ways of living with our sisters and brothers.

We've been exploring how that new life and those new ways of living look as we act boldly. Our exploration of bold action in Jesus' name continues with the exploration of how we might act boldly with kindness.

And now we're back to the question that this session had at its beginning. Just exactly what is kindness? My computer's thesaurus lists as synonyms for kindness: compassion, sympathy, benevolence, thoughtfulness, consideration, and helpfulness. The antonym that the thesaurus names is cruelty. What would you add to both lists?

Chrestotes is the Greek word that Paul used, the word that we've translated as kindness. The Rheims version of the Bible translates *chrestotes* in 2 Corinthians 6:6 not as kindness, as does the New Revised Standard Version, but as sweetness. *Chrestotes* is the word used in Ephesians 2:7 to tell us about the sweetness of God's grace, given to us in Christ Jesus. "Amazing grace, how sweet the sound!" Wine that has aged to perfection can be called *chrestotes*. We might call the wine that is Christ's blood *chrestotes*. When Jesus tells us in Matthew 11:30 that his yoke is easy and his burden light, he is describing a yoke like that worn

by a pair of bullocks as they plow a rice paddy in Sri Lanka. The evangelist has Jesus use the word *chrestotes* to describe the ease of the yoke that we share with him. It doesn't rub our skin raw and make our muscles ache because our Lord helps bear our burdens. This is the kindness, the *chrestotes*, of God's grace.

We recognize kindness, *chrestotes*, when we see it. The clerk at the grocery store who leads an older woman to the cans of soup a few aisles back is practicing kindness. The man who stops to help a family change a tire by the side of the interstate is acting with kindness.

What is bold kindness? How can we act boldly with kindness?

Thomas

Not long ago, I was on a plane going . . . somewhere. I don't remember where, but I do remember the baby on his mother's lap a few rows in front of me. He was about eight or nine months old, and he'd been sweet and agreeable for the first half-hour of the trip. But then something happened to his good mood. Earache or stomachache or fatigue—you name it. He couldn't name it; all he could do was cry. And cry some more. I'm a grandmother. I couldn't stop watching the little one, so close in age to one of my grandkids. I watched his mom, too, and saw her shift gradually from patience to frustration as the crying went on and her attempts to provide comfort were fruitless. The annoyed looks of the other passengers were no help.

When I saw that both mother and child were growing desperate, I went to their row. "I'm a grandma," I said to the mom. "Would you mind if I took the baby for a while?" She didn't hesitate. She handed him over immediately. "Thomas," she said. It took me a second to realize that must be his name. "Thank you," I said, over Thomas's head. "I'll just carry him

around for a bit." I strolled up the aisle so that she could see us and make sure that Thomas was okay. I stood in the bulkhead area and swayed back and forth with Thomas, who was intrigued into silence. We walked up and down the aisle, and walked and swayed some more. Thomas got interested in my glasses and the cross hanging around my neck. I got a bit drooly on the front and baby fingerprints blurred my vision, but I loved every minute of it. Thomas was no light load, and my back eventually suggested that it was time to take him back to his mother, who was watching with relief. I said thank you to Thomas and his mother. We didn't hear a peep out of Thomas the rest of the flight. Nothing like surprise to cure a crying fit!

I had reached out to someone—two someones—in distress and only realized later that it was a boldly kind act. In this series we've been talking about two kinds of boldness. The first kind of boldness is *tolmao* boldness, boldness carried out with fear and trembling. It is the boldness of playing in a piano recital when you're afraid that you'll mess up, but doing it anyway. The second kind of boldness we've talked about is *parrhesia* boldness, the kind of boldness that grows out of a conviction that something must be done.

My action on the plane with Thomas and his mother was a combination of nervousness and conviction. I wondered whether the mother would take offense and embarrass me in front of dozens of interested onlookers. Her nerves were pretty shot, after all. But I figured I had a pretty good chance of being able to hold a baby—and that is a reward in itself. A little *tolmao* boldness, a little more *parrhesia* boldness.

A Widow Caught In Between

It is time to meet a boldly kind woman of the Old Testament. Her story is told in 1 Kings 17:8–24. We know her as the widow of Zarephath. She lived in

the northern kingdom of Israel during the reign of King Ahab, husband of Queen Jezebel. Now Ahab was so evil that he outdid all the evil kings before him (1 Kings 16:30). He worshiped Baal and fought with the LORD's prophet, Elijah. Ahab reigned and Elijah prophesied during the ninth century before Christ.

The land was groaning under a drought that Elijah had predicted, which earned him no favor with King Ahab. Three years after this story, the heavens would burst open with rain when Elijah proves that his God, not Baal, is the God of heaven and earth (1 Kings 18).

When our story begins, the land is bone dry and the crops have shriveled in the fields. At the LORD's direction, Elijah leaves the parched land east of the Jordan River, where he feasted on bread and meat through the miraculous kindness of ravens. He crosses the river and moves north to Zarephath, on the seacoast between Tyre and Sidon.

Here Elijah meets the widow of Zarephath. As we consider her bold kindness, we'll focus on the story in verses 8–16 of 1 Kings 17. Four readers will be needed as we tell this story to each other: a narrator, the LORD, the prophet Elijah, and the widow.

LET'S TALK ABOUT BOLD KINDNESS

- What words would you choose to define the word *kindness*?
- What act of kindness are you called to do today? This week?
- What did you learn from the time you let an opportunity to act boldly with kindness slip away? Tell about that experience and what you learned.

Narrator: Then the word of the LORD came to Elijah, saying,

The LORD: "Go now to Zarephath, which belongs to Sidon, and live there; for I have commanded a widow there to feed you."

Narrator: So he set out and went to Zarephath. When he came to the gate of the town, a widow was there gathering sticks; he called to her and said,

Elijah: "Bring me a little water in a vessel, so that I may drink."

Narrator: As she was going to bring it, he called to her and said,

Elijah: "Bring me a morsel of bread in your hand."

Narrator: But she said,

Widow: "As the LORD your God lives, I have nothing baked, only a handful of meal in a jar, and a little oil in a jug; I am now gathering a couple of sticks, so that I may go home and prepare it for myself and my son, that we may eat it, and die."

Narrator: Elijah said to her,

Elijah: "Do not be afraid; go and do as you have said; but first make me a little cake of it and bring it to me, and afterwards make something for yourself and your son. For thus says the LORD the God of Israel: The jar of meal will not be emptied and the jug of oil will not fail until the day that the LORD sends rain on the earth."

Narrator: She went and did as Elijah said, so that she as well as her household ate for many days. The jar of meal was not emptied, neither did the jug of oil fail, according to the word of the LORD that he spoke to Elijah.

Does the widow of Zarephath seem to you to be someone who has acted boldly with kindness? Let's look at this passage more closely.

The passage begins with Elijah's appearance at the town gates. Town gates were important places.

During the day the men of the town gathered there and did business (Ruth 4:1). Women came and went through the gate to fetch water and to gather wood as did the widow of Zarephath. The gates were closed at night to keep out strangers—although they couldn't keep out neighbors with evil intent (Genesis 19:1–5).

At the gates of the town, Elijah spies the widow and calls out to her for water. She responds with kindness, bringing him that life-giving gift. But his requests escalate. “Bring me a morsel of bread,” he cries out. Her answer tells a painful story. “As the LORD your God lives,” she begins, but these words are more than an opening statement. They are the words of an oath, an oath sworn on the truth that Elijah’s LORD and God is a living God. Why begin this way? The widow is saying that what follows is the absolute truth. And the truth is that she has no bread, only a bit of meal in the bottom of a jar and a little oil in the bottom of a jug. She’s going to use the sticks she’s been gathering to make a last meal for her son and herself, and then they will lie down to starve to death.

What nerve Elijah has! He continues to ask for bread, made from her last handful of grain and bit of oil. He tells her that she can use what’s left over for her son and herself. And yes, he promises her the moon. Actually, he promises her better than that. He promises in the name of the living God that she won’t see the bottom of the jar of meal or the jug of oil until the rain comes again, and with it the crops.

How bold the widow of Zarephath is! How kind! She mixes together the meal and the oil, bakes a little cake, and gives it to Elijah. Would you do that? The chances that she would respond with kindness are slim. First of all, she doesn’t know this man. Second, his pushiness after she has made clear her dire straits might very well have turned her away.

Third, the widow had no reason to believe that this stranger had any way of fulfilling that absurd

promise about unlimited flour and oil. No doubt she’d heard a number of empty promises in her years, as have we all. She had no history with Elijah to know that he was speaking for God. Whether or not she believed him, she went ahead and made him some food out of her meager store.

Boldly kind, she was. Whether nervously bold (*tolmao* bold) or bold from conviction (*parrhesia* bold), we don’t know. We do know that she acted boldly with kindness.

LET’S TALK ABOUT THE WIDOW OF ZAREPHATH

- To whom might the widow have gone for help for herself and her son as they were starving?
- What risks did she take in acknowledging Elijah’s presence at the town gates and agreeing to bring him water?
- What options did she have when Elijah asked her for a “little cake”? Why did she choose to make one for him?

LET’S TALK ABOUT OURSELVES

- Have you ever been down to your last dollar? Whom did you ask for help?
- When have you taken a chance and helped a person whom you did not know? How did it turn out?
- Have you ever fasted? How did that compare with going hungry because there is no alternative?

Additional Study: More Acts of Bold Kindness

If there is time, we can consider other biblical acts of bold kindness. For example, King David was kind to Jonathan's crippled son, Mephiboseth, after his father and grandfather, Saul, were killed (2 Samuel 9). This was a bold kindness, since Mephiboseth was the grandson of the old king who had tried to kill David and therefore an heir, and a potential threat, to David's throne.

We never tire of reading about Jesus' acts of bold kindness to bleeding women, untouchable lepers, hordes of hungry people, dishonest tax collectors, the demon-possessed, shouting blind men, and his own bumbling disciples. His bold kindness was never as startling as when, from the misery of the cross, he gave his mother and the disciple whom he loved to each other as mother and son (John 19:26–27).

Would you have run away if an earthquake had thrown open the doors to your cell? Paul and Silas didn't. They stayed. Was their act an act of boldness? By staying, they saved the jailer who would have paid with his life had they escaped. Read Acts 16:25–34 and see what you think.

LET'S TALK FURTHER

- Are you a stepmother, a stepchild, a stepgrandmother, or stepsister? When have you been kind to a member of the other side of the family, even though no one else was ready to do that?
- Have you served as a mother or daughter, grandmother or grandchild to someone who wasn't a blood relative? Tell about that relationship.
- Do you think that Paul and Silas's action in Acts 16:25–34 was an act of bold kindness? Why? Why not?

WHEN ARE WE BOLDLY KIND?

- Has your congregation been involved in servant evangelism, for example, giving away bottles of water to patients, visitors, and staff at the local hospital with no strings attached, just as God's grace is given to us?
- Have you volunteered to be a regular visitor to inmates at the jail in your county?
- Have you intervened when a clerk was abrupt with a customer with limited English, and tried to ease the tension?
- Have you quietly told a neighbor or a friend at church that you are deeply concerned about the bruises you see on her arms and face from time to time, that you think that she is being abused, and that you are ready to help her?
- Have you prepared and served meals at your local shelter for homeless people or housed families with children at your church?
- Have you written or e-mailed your representatives in Congress to urge them to address issues vital to immigrants?
- Have you offered to help set up a nursery that will be open during your group's sessions, so that women with young children can easily attend?

A Story: Running on Empty

One evening about 20 years ago, my car ran out of gas on the interstate during rush hour. I was able to steer to the shoulder as it coasted to a stop, and then I sat there in the driver's seat and went through all the Kübler-Ross stages of grief: denial, bargaining, anger, depression, and, finally, acceptance. When I got all

of that out of my system, I carefully made my way down the next exit ramp to a gas station. Dusk was falling, making the grayness of the gritty neighborhood even grayer.

I waited my turn in the station behind a man who took his candy bar with a "gracias" for the clerk. Then it was my turn. The man at the register listened impatiently to my story, then told me that he would give me a gallon of gas but he needed a cash deposit for the can—five dollars. Cash. A cash deposit? I didn't have five dollars cash. I didn't even have a dollar—or fifty cents!

The man with the candy bar was standing nearby listening. He didn't appear to be a rich man, with his faded plaid shirt and worn jeans. He edged a bit closer to look when I showed the clerk my empty billfold. The clerk finally sighed and gave me a gas can with a gallon in it. I promised to bring the can back and use my credit card to pay for that gallon and then fill my tank.

I left, with the can of gas sloshing by my side. The man with the candy bar left, too. I made my way through the deepening twilight to the exit ramp. As I walked, I realized that the man was following me. I got a little nervous and walked a little

faster. So did he. The faster I walked, the faster he walked. Then I felt a touch on my sleeve and heard a few words of Spanish. I turned, not knowing what to expect—certainly not what I saw. It was a hand outstretched offering a dollar bill to me, the woman with the empty billfold and the old car out of gas.

The widow of Zarephath was kind with her last bit of food. The widow Jesus saw in the Temple in Jerusalem offered with great kindness her last two coins to help others (Luke 21:1-4). My new friend reached out to me out of concern for my plight.

Was he concerned that I might scream and run when he touched my sleeve? Or did he simply recognize that I needed all the help I could get and that he could offer some? Was he bold with fear and trembling, or bold with his conviction that he could help?

I'll never know if my benefactor was nervously bold or boldly confident. Whatever it was, he held out that dollar in bold kindness. I will never forget him.

The Rev. Sue Gamelin and her husband, Tim, are pastors of Emmanuel Lutheran Church, High Point, N.C.



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Not-So-Random Acts of KINDNESS

by Karen Burgess-Cassler

A couple of years ago, my mother had open-heart surgery. She had a variety of complications, including a stroke, and ended up spending nearly three months in the hospital. Several times, we thought that she would certainly die; or if she did recover, we thought she would be so impaired that she would never recognize us or be able to do anything on her own. We were wrong, thank God; she recovered enough to leave the hospital and come home to live with me.

But she still needed a lot of care for quite some time. She could barely stand on her own when she came home to us, and she had lost most of her sense of balance. Someone had to help her as she moved slowly, leaning on a walker, from the bedroom to the kitchen. It took time, but she steadily improved both physically and mentally. My brothers and husband were helpful, but I was the one who was responsible for her minute-by-minute physical care. I was nearly always on call. I was glad and grateful to have my mother at home, but I often found those days and months of care wearing.

My mother says now that I did a wonderful job, helping her patiently and cheerfully. I know, though, that there were times when I felt out of patience, when on the inside, at least, I was cranky and nasty. Caring for my mother in that way gave me many, many opportunities to act with kindness—or not. I am still practicing. So how do you learn to be kind?

Learning kindness

The experience with my mom has made me think differently about

kindness. It's more than a feeling—it's a way of acting and speaking. It's about making decisions. Is it possible to learn to be kind?

Kindness is partly a matter of choosing to put someone else's needs ahead of our own. How many people have rocked a feverish toddler late into the night when they would have rather stayed in bed? I love my children dearly, but sometimes I have to choose to treat them lovingly. It can be hard to erase the impatience from my voice, but that is what kindness entails. There is an intentional element to kindness that I haven't always understood.

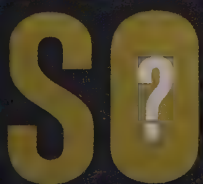
I teach second grade. Most people think that my job is instructing my students in reading, writing, arithmetic, science—the basics. That's certainly part of it. But I also teach life skills that children need in order to grow up to be respectful adolescents and kind adults.

It's well documented that people (not just children) work best in environments that are safe and welcoming, where there are clear expectations and boundaries. So I intentionally teach my students the attitudes and actions that will

help us get along together so that we can learn well together. Civility and courtesy are teachable aspects of kindness. Such small acts as greeting one another politely, holding the door for a classmate in a wheelchair, picking up something a neighbor dropped—these go far toward shaping that safe, welcoming environment where students and teachers treat one another with respect and kindness.

So my students and I practice shaking hands and apologizing for small accidents. We make a point of using polite voices and words with one another. We notice classmates who are behaving kindly and cheer them on. We notice those who have forgotten (as we all do) and are not behaving kindly, and we work on ways to resolve conflicts for the good of all concerned.

I have the same conversations with my students that I had with my own three children, now nearly grown. "How does she feel when you grab the pencil from her? How could you find out? What could you do now? What could you do the next time you need a pencil?" and so on.



HOW DO YOU LEARN TO BE KIND

But the most powerful tools in teaching children kindness are not direct lessons. The most powerful tools are incidental, indirect conversations that name thoughtfulness as it happens, and the example (good or bad) provided by the adults in their lives.

Teaching by example

When I point out examples of kindness or cruelty, in confirmation class or in my second-grade classroom, my students almost always pay rapt attention. Something about telling a story—as opposed to teaching a lesson—grabs them.

Once I told my confirmation class about something I had seen the day before. I had been in line at the post office on a busy day, and three or four windows were open. In front of me in line was an African American man. Finally he was at the front of the line, and a window opened up. When he was halfway to the open window, the clerk glanced at him, slammed down his “closed” sign, and disappeared. The man stood at the window, looking annoyed and embarrassed. What to do? He wasn’t in line any longer, but he had no open window and no clerk. After a moment, another window at the other end of the counter opened up. I was next in line, and I gestured for him to take

that window. As he passed me, I said, “I’m sorry.” He answered, “It’s not you—that’s all right.” I felt bad for him and angry at the postal worker. It was a brief incident. Still, I felt horrible about it.

As I think back on telling the story to my confirmation class, I am struck by how the seventh- and eighth-graders listened. I wasn’t lecturing—I was speaking in a conversational voice, describing something that I was still stewing about. I wasn’t trying to teach—I was sharing my struggle. I related my feelings of dismay, vague shame, and confusion about what I could have or should have done. What do you do when a nasty act of unkindness is carried out right in front of your eyes?

Two of my own children were in that group, and they said later that they appreciated my honesty about the discomfort and uncertainty I felt. My son told me, “Adults just tell you what to do most of the time. They never let you know when they don’t have the answers.” Perhaps in this instance, teaching kindness meant letting the kids in on my struggle.

Spreading kindness

Children learn more by watching us than by listening to us, and this is as true in our schools as in our homes. If I turn to sarcasm when

I am frustrated or irritated, my students will not learn from me how to handle frustration or irritation properly. If I find out what happened instead of yelling, I am more likely to solve problems, and children realize how effective that is. If I reveal impatience with myself, I teach my students to be dissatisfied with themselves. If I treat my own mistakes as an ordinary part of life, not loaded with shame or anger, children can learn to cope with setbacks without losing heart. If my students see me having fun helping someone else, they are likely to find pleasure in the same way. When I apologize readily for little goofs, my students can learn to do so as well.

My own power as a role model humbles me, both in the classroom and at home. Children see us as we are. That fact has inspired me to reach for growth in patience and gentleness, not just for myself, but for the good of my students and children. We are all role models. We can be kind because we have received God’s kindness. The people in our lives can learn about kindness because we treat them kindly.

Karen Burgess-Cassler lives in Vancouver, Wash., and teaches in Brush Prairie. She is a member of the Lutheran Deaconess Conference.

WE RECOMMEND

RESOURCES FOR ACTION, ADVOCACY, PROGRAMS, OR FURTHER STUDY

WANT TO WORSHIP BOLDLY?

To help you explore what it means for you and the women of your community to act boldly, the new Women of the ELCA worship resource, *Worship Boldly*, expresses the triennial theme through song, prayer, and liturgy. The women's organization has also launched a new health initiative, "Raising Up Healthy Women and Girls," and *Worship Boldly* includes liturgical resources that relate to healing, health, and wholeness. The prayers, litanies, and occasional services can be used in a variety of ways for meetings, retreats, and synodical conventions. You can order *Worship Boldly* through Augsburg Fortress by calling 800-328-4648 or go to www.augsburgfortress.org (cost is \$7.99 plus shipping).

WHAT'S DIVERSITY?

Dialogue of Words is a reference resource that bridges the anti-racist educational focus of the Women of the ELCA with its desire to be multicultural. It provides definitions of the words racism, anti-racism, cross-cultural, diversity, tolerance, and inclusivity and features the unique ways Women of the ELCA use these words in setting goals and programming. Copies are free through Augsburg Fortress (800-328-4648 or www.augsburgfortress.org), but there is a charge for shipping.

WOMEN OF THE ELCA GRANTS AND SCHOLARSHIPS

Apply for scholarships now. The Women of the ELCA scholarships support a variety of academic pursuits, including undergraduate study, seminary study, second-career students, and academic professionals.

Scholarship applications and guidelines are available at www.womenoftheelca.org/whatWeDo/support.html. Scholarships are awarded for the 2006-2007 academic year.

Raising Up Healthy Women and Girls Grants. The Women of the ELCA announces new domestic and international grants in support of its 2005-2008 health initiative, "Raising Up Healthy Women and Girls." Over the next three years, grant priorities will focus on the physical, emotional, and spiritual health of women and girls. Download guidelines and applications at www.womenoftheelca.org/whatWeDo/support.html. Postmark deadline for applications and supporting materials for both scholarships and grants is February 15. Questions about grants and scholarships should be addressed to Emily Hansen at 800-638-3522 ext. 2736 or emily.hansen@elca.org.

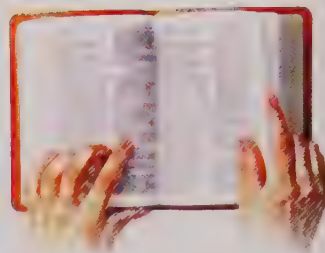
HELPING THE DISPLACED

Hurricanes last fall uprooted thousands of people from their homes, livelihoods, families, and neighborhoods. Many have responded to this upheaval by offering their churches and communities as places where displaced Americans can find a new place to call home—for however long that may be. Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service offers *The Guide for Sponsoring Displaced Americans*. This resource offers tips on identifying immediate needs and accessing aid from disaster relief agencies. Also included is a checklist of suggested household supplies and a budget worksheet to help congregations prepare for their sponsorship. The guide is available free for download and printing from the LIRS Web site at www.lirs.org.

Session 6

Act Boldly with Generosity

by Sue Gamelin



LET'S TALK

What are the ways you like to be generous?
Tell others in your group by completing the
sentence, "I know that I am generous when I..."

Generosity, Greed, and Envy: Ouch!

"Are you envious because I am generous?" So asks the landowner in the parable that Jesus taught (Matthew 20:1–16). The landowner (that is, God) gets to the heart of the matter. "Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?"

Wait a minute! This session is supposed to be about how we act boldly with generosity, the sixth of the benefits that Paul names as the fruit of the Holy Spirit in Galatians 5:22–23. We've been talking about how we can act boldly with love, with joy, in peace, with patience, and with kindness. Some of those topics weren't easy, but this session should be. We can talk about how we keep our pledges at church and fill envelopes for the ELCA World Hunger Appeal and all the other good things we do. That's acting boldly with generosity! What's all this about being envious because God is generous?

Sorry, but we're going to have that conversation. Any conversation about how we can act boldly with

generosity has to begin with God and God's generosity. And it has to include a touchy subject: Our envy of God's generosity to others.

"Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me?" the landowner asks in Matthew 20:15. Just so God asks us, "What do you have that I didn't give you?" Job gives us the answer in the first chapter of his book. Grieving the deaths of his sons, daughters, servants, and his flocks and herds, he is still able to praise God. "Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked shall I return there; the LORD gave and the LORD has taken away; blessed be the name of the LORD" (Job 1:21).

We've heard God's thoughts about worldly wealth. In Jesus' parable of the rich fool, God says to the barn-building farmer, "And the things you have prepared, whose will they be? So it is with those who store up treasure for themselves but are not rich toward God."

Job does better than my grandson, Bryan. When he was seven, Bryan went through a phase of wanting nothing more than to be rich. He started hoarding any coins or bills he could get his hands on. He checked for stray coins in gumball machines and rummaged through the ball pit in the fast food restaurant's playground. His fortune grew. One day Bryan told me that he had solved a problem. The problem: How could he keep his money forever? The solution: He would tie a little trailer to himself right before he died and take his money with him!

Are we envious of those who have stored up treasure? It could be. And it could be that, like the rich fool, we in the culture of the West are going through a phase in which we yearn to be filthy rich. We see those who stand in long lines to buy a ticket when the lottery prize reaches a record high. We dream of giving our children and grandchildren the fortune that could arrive on our doorstep one day in the form of a million dollars and a McMahan bearing flowers and a huge check.

Or another scenario might better reflect your dreams. This is Rob's scenario: "I don't need any more money. I'd just like to have all my debts paid off." We have so much. But a study some years ago revealed that no matter what we have, we want 10 percent more.

Perhaps your yearning for more is a yearning for better health for yourself or someone you love. You may see others who seem to enjoy good health and feel bitter toward them.

Or perhaps we want a corner on the forgiveness market. We want last-minute repenters to be deprived of the wealth of forgiveness, both God's and ours. What do we have? "Poor, but honest," we can say. That's our treasure. "First, do no harm." That's our guideline. "Love your neighbor as you love yourself." That's our mandate. We do that, God. We're not like those other people, those rogues, thieves, adulterers, tax collectors. Let us reign over the reward given to the righteous.

How can we greedy ones act boldly with generosity? How can we be "rich toward God"? When Paul speaks in Galatians 5:22–23 of the fruit of the Spirit, he includes the Greek word *agathosune* (ag-a-thoh-SOO-nay). Sometimes that word is translated as "goodness," but in the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible it is translated as "generosity."

Agathosune is a muscular word; it comes with an understanding that those who do not conform to

its standards can be rebuked. *Agathosune* is derived from the Greek word for "good," *agathos* (AG-a-thos). The scholars who wrote the Septuagint, the oldest Greek translation of the Old Testament, usually used the word *agathos* for the Hebrew word *tov* (tove). When our generous God created us and all that is, creation was accompanied by a pronouncement: "God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good" (Genesis 1:31). Good, *tov*, *agathos*. This kind of goodness grows from and is identified with God's generosity.

How can we who envy God's generosity to others make bold generosity our way of life? How can we who want just 10 percent more be generous with *tol-mao* (tol-MAH-oh) boldness? That's the kind of bold generosity that leads to shaky writing on our checks, because we're nervous about what we're doing. How can we who pore anxiously over the stock listings be generous with *parrhesia* (par-ray-SEE-ah) boldness? That's the kind of passionately bold generosity that John Hancock had when he signed the Declaration of Independence with that bold, confident signature.

Let's look to biblical heroes as we talk about how we can act boldly with generosity.

LET'S TALK ABOUT BOLD GENEROSITY

- Which of God's acts of bold generosity in the Bible is the most difficult for you to comprehend? Ask the group for help in understanding it.
- Are you envious, or even angry, because God has been boldly generous to someone you know, someone you think is less worthy than you?
- What act of bold generosity do you think God wants you to do this week with something precious to you—your money, your time, your talents?

A Generous Convert

The story of the conversion of Lydia in Acts 16:11–15 is a story of generosity. Paul is going about with Silas and Timothy in the area we now know as Turkey, but they are not finding a receptive audience. Acts 16:6–7 says, “They went through the region of Phrygia and Galatia, having been forbidden by the Holy Spirit to speak the word in Asia [the name of eastern Turkey then]. When they had come opposite Mysia, they attempted to go into Bithynia, but the Spirit of Jesus did not allow them.”

When doors seem closed, windows open. In Troas, Paul has a vision that changes his ministry, a vision of God’s great generosity. In it, a man from Macedonia across the sea pleads, “Come over to Macedonia and help us” (Acts 16:9b). And so they do. Paul, Silas, and Timothy cross the sea and make their way to Philippi, a major city and Roman colony. A mile west of the city flowed a river. A Roman arch stood between the city and the river.

Paul may have passed under this arch when he, Silas, and Timothy went “outside the gate by the river” (v. 13) on the Sabbath day. They are looking for a place of prayer different from those offered by the Roman colonists. It would have to be on the other side of the Roman arch, outside the city. Outside the gate, by the river, they find just what they are looking for. Wouldn’t it be wonderful to have listened in when the men sat down to talk with the women gathered there!

In Paul’s time, it would have been unusual for most men and women to speak to each other in public, but among Christians, women were important in a new way. Jesus had many women traveling with him and paying his expenses (Luke 8:1–3). He talked with, forgave, healed, taught, and offered his *agape* (ah-GAH-pay) love to many women as well as men. After Mary Magdalene’s stunning announcement

to the disciples that Jesus was alive, women played an important part in the community that gathered around the risen Christ and his Spirit. What about Paul? We can read in Romans 16 about some of the women to whom Paul is indebted in his ministry. It is clear that the barriers that separated men and women were broken down in the church that is Christ’s body in the world.

Outside the gate, by the river. How generous God is to those outside the centers of power, outside the halls of privilege, outside the gates. Outside the gates of Philippi, by the river, Lydia awaits the word of Jesus that Paul, Silas, and Timothy bring. She, like them, has come a long way. Her home is Thyatira, across the sea from Philippi, the sea that the evangelists have just crossed. Thyatira was famous for its guild of dyers and their beautiful work. Purple was most expensive dye, used in making fabric for the elite. Those who worked with purple, as Lydia did, had the resources to prepare this valuable cloth and charge a good price for it.

Lydia is already a worshiper of God. Her heart is open to what God will say to her. Paul, Silas, and Timothy tell the women outside the gate, by the river, about Jesus, and Lydia listens. “The Lord opened her heart to listen eagerly to what was said by Paul” (Acts 16:14b). Lydia listened with her own generous eagerness.

And Lydia is baptized, but not only Lydia. How generous she is to tell her entire household about this Risen Christ, now her Lord, and to draw them all to Holy Baptism. Acts 16:15 begins simply: “When she and her household were baptized . . .” There is a world of meaning in those few words. Can you imagine the scene at her house when she arrived with the news of Jesus as Lord and Savior? How generous is God’s grace in calling and receiving them.

I was baptized on May 9, 1944, when I was almost one year old. My father was home on leave from the Navy. We have a picture from my baptismal day, a picture that my dad carried every day until he came home. My family wasn't a church-going family then, but there was pressure on my parents to "have the baby done" while my dad was home. And so I was "done" that day. From that day on, I have been overwhelmed by God's generosity, generosity so full that it brought me to the church even when no one else from my family was going; generosity so deep that it carried me back to the church after my time of wandering; generosity so lavish that it got me through troubling times; generosity so amazing that it brought my parents to the church and absorbed them fully.

I pray that it was so with Lydia. Indeed, her first action after she and her household are baptized is to issue an irresistible invitation to Paul and Timothy to stay with them. Lydia has gotten it: To be a recipient of God's generosity means that we become generous ourselves. "If you have judged me to be faithful to the Lord, come and stay at my home," she says. "And she prevailed upon us" (v. 15). Her God-given generosity is already put into practice.

Philippi became a precious place for Paul. He calls the congregation that grew there, with Lydia's help, "my beloved" (Philippians 2:12) and "my joy and my crown" (4:1). The Philippians, in turn, were generous with Paul, offering him not only a home, but other help as well (4:15). Many have described the special relationship of Paul and those who had gathered outside the gate, by the river. Paul's love and gratitude for them was generous.

"Are you envious because I am generous?" the landowner (that is, God) asks us, we who want more of everything (Matthew 20:15). How can we be greedy for wealth, for health, for forgiveness when God has been so generous with us? We can offer

generosity to all we meet, opening our hearts, our homes, our congregations to them, rich and poor, saint and sinner. We live with the fruit of generosity planted in our hearts, watered by our baptism, and nourished by the body and blood of Jesus. We who have received so much can give so much.

LET'S TALK ABOUT LYDIA

- What brought Lydia outside the gate to the river that day?
- Who would you like to have been that day? Paul, Timothy, Lydia, a member of Lydia's household, or another of the bystanders?
- Which of Lydia's characteristics would you most like to emulate?

LET'S TALK ABOUT OURSELVES

- Describe a time when it seemed that you couldn't do, in Jesus' name, something you very much wanted to do.
- For what is your heart open? What are you eager to hear this day?
- Who needs your act of generosity this week? What kind of generosity is required?

Additional Study

With additional time, study all of Acts 16. Read about the ministry of Paul, Silas, and Timothy, and their frustrations. Follow the three to Philippi and the conversion of Lydia. Read about their encounter with a slave girl. Get dragged with them to jail. Be drawn into the account of the earthquake, and see

their ministry with their jailer. Follow them back to Lydia's house, and listen to them encouraging their brothers and sisters in Christ who gather there.

Count the acts of God's generosity that you find in this chapter of Acts.

LET'S TALK FURTHER

- Do you know someone who needs to be set free from their chains and the power of evil? What can you do?
- Would you have fled from prison, had you been with Paul and Silas? Why? Why not?
- Think of a time when you confronted those inside the gate, that is, authority figures, with the truth of their injustice. Tell the group about it.

A Story: Get Over It!

Marie and I were having coffee and I was telling her about my sister's worries about her retirement. "She's worked for non-profits all through her career, combating sexual assault and domestic violence. She's almost 60 and she's really worried about what she'll be able to live on when she retires." I shook my head over my sister's plight. Marie had a solution. "Just tell her, 'Get over it!'"

I know Marie well enough not to choke on my coffee. Marie means it when she says, "Get over it." She has.

Marie is an artist who works in pastels and acrylics, yarns and threads, clay and beads. She worked as a graphic designer for years. One day her doctor diagnosed cancer. When she returned to work after her surgery, she discovered that her company had hired a younger, lower-paid worker who gradually took over her work. Marie was laid off. This isn't legal? You're

right. But this kind of maneuver, conducted over time, is difficult to prove. Marie was unemployed and at her age, not exactly a hot commodity on the job market. She has a home, left to her by her parents. She has a bit of income. She sells a painting from time to time, and picks up odd jobs now and then. She has nieces and nephews, grandnieces and grandnephews, left for her after her brothers and sister died. Marie has lost so much. But she's gotten over it.

What Marie will tell you over coffee, her eyes twinkling with fun, is how much she has. She'll tell you how wonderful it is to reach out to older folks in the congregation, because she doesn't have older folks in her family. She offered rides, lunches, and expeditions to my parents when they were "homeless" because of hurricane damage to their home in Florida. She says it is a joy to be with parents, because she has none of her own. She leaves gifts of chocolate for those of us who love it, and bagels for someone she suspects might have skipped breakfast. She showed up with her wet-vac at Ida's house to help her clean up a flood in her basement. Marie has amazing stories of generosity that she keeps private, times when she used her last dollar for someone in desperate straits. Marie overflows with generosity.

"Get over it," she wants to tell my sister. Get over worrying about the future. Today's problems are enough for the day. "Get over it," she tells all of us when we want more of something that we think is indispensable. She knows that nothing is indispensable. "Get over it," she says when we whine. She tells us there's nothing better than a dive into God's word, prayer with God's people, and a good laugh when we think we're deprived of something.

"Get over it," Marie says, and then she loves us generously. She uses her artistic skills to enliven the congregation's mailings. She leads the women's group with a generosity of humor that puts picayune

WHEN ARE WE GENEROUS?

- When have you surprised a friend and yourself by listening intently to her and giving her all the time she needed to tell you about something important—without once interjecting your own story?
- Have you moved to tithing in your giving to the church? Have you moved beyond tithing?
- Have you gone to someone with whom you are angry, for what seems to you good reason, and asked them to talk with you about that anger and your hope for reconciliation? Have you gone to someone who is angry with you, for good reason, and asked them to forgive you?
- Have you opened your heart and your home to foster children, adopted children, an elderly parent, or someone else who needed refuge?
- Have you offered to teach your skills to someone who needed to learn them?
- Has your congregation housed a 12-step program? Day care for the children of immigrant families? After-school tutoring? Adult day care?
- When have you turned your pocketbook upside down for a family in need? Have you joined an organization devoted to combating the reasons behind this tragedy?

problems in their place. She is one of a dozen women in our congregation who knit hundreds of prayer shawls, dozens of chemo caps, and bunches of Christmas hats for the children's hospital. She, who isn't fond of house cleaning, cleaned the house of a neighbor who would have been in a nursing home after her fall if it hadn't been for the generosity of her church friends. Marie shares breakfast and lunch with people who are alone. She remembers birthdays and sends out thoughtful e-mails. She helps the young people make pinch pots to hold Advent candles, she polishes the bells on the All Saints banners, and she leads the Bible study for the older men's class at church. They still can't figure out just how that happened!

"Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? But strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well" (Matthew 6:25, 33).

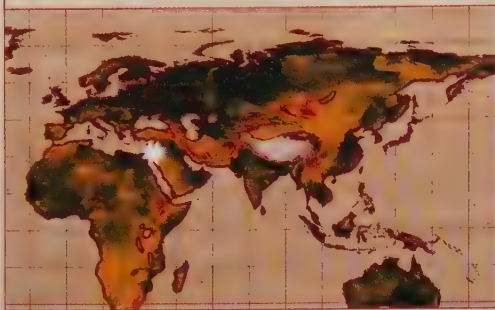
Marie has nourished the benefit of generosity that God gave her in her baptism. She has gotten over being envious because God is generous with others. She is profoundly grateful that God is so generous with her.

The Rev. Sue Gamelin and her husband Tim are co-pastors of a congregation in High Point, N.C.

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Share an article or two with women in your congregation who may not be receiving the magazine and encourage them to subscribe. Even if they can't come to Bible study because of busy schedules, raising children, or ill health, they can still be strengthened in faith and inspired by our articles. Help them connect with God, the church, and the Women of the ELCA. To order a subscription call 800-328-4648.

ISRAEL



GEOGRAPHY

Israel is slightly smaller than New Jersey, the West Bank is slightly smaller than Delaware, and the Gaza Strip is slightly more than twice the size of Washington, D.C.

POPULATION

6.2 million Israelis
3.8 million Palestinians
(living predominately in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip)

LIFE EXPECTANCY

Israelis: Men 77 years,
women 82 years
Palestinians: Men 71 years,
women 74 years

POVERTY RATE

Israel: 18%
West Bank: 59% (2004 est.)
Gaza Strip: 81% (2004 est.)

UNEMPLOYMENT

Israel: 10.7%
West Bank: 27.2% (includes Gaza Strip) (2004 est.)
Gaza Strip: 50% (includes West Bank) (2003 est.)

STRIVING FOR NORMALCY

by Ann Hafften

Sometimes making peace means simply abiding, carrying out life's routines for the sake of those around us. In Jerusalem, Nah'la Azar does that every day, persevering in maintaining a normal life in a situation that grows more and more burdensome. One day her daily routine encountered terrorism.

Azar teaches English at the Sur-Baher public school for boys in Jerusalem. As a Palestinian Christian, Azar is in the minority there. Other women teachers wear the *hijab*, the headscarf emblematic of Islam. The students' parents know little about Christians, and she often feels isolated. Azar says she tells the lessons of Christ without mentioning Jesus by name.

Azar's husband drove her to school as usual on the day she met violent hate. As she entered the schoolyard, she could see that something unusual was happening. On the far side of the playground, the headmaster was standing near an object that looked something like a tree bearing bright, shiny ornaments.

Azar looked at the object, trying to understand what it was. Then she realized it was an explosive device—a bomb—set to kill or injure anyone within range. Someone had already called the police.

The headmaster made a quick decision. He ran inside and rang the school bell five minutes early, immediately sending all the students to their classrooms where they would be protected and out of range. Azar believes the headmaster felt the bomb was set to go off just before the school bell's regular time, when all the students would be walking past.

"Indeed, just as the boys got to their classrooms, the bomb exploded—sending nails, pins, glass, and sand shooting

everywhere,” Azar said. “It was a terrifying sight and sound, and the children were crying and shouting. In that second I thought about my family, my husband and daughters, with fear that they would suffer from this too. It was the worst minute of my life,” Azar said.

She told this story to the Lutherans gathered in Fargo, North Dakota, for ELCA’s Global Mission Event last summer. No one was seriously injured by the bomb, she said. Azar had many sleepless nights and troubled thoughts after that day of violence, but eventually she regained her balance. “I feel as though I have received a new life—that God has given me a new opportunity,” she said.

That day gives new meaning to the way Azar looks to the future: “I realized that it didn’t matter to me who planted this bomb in the schoolyard, set to go off when it would hurt the greatest number of children on a busy morning. Israelis and Palestinians are fighting each other, but nobody has the right to put an end to another person’s life.

“This experience did not change my belief in God’s love for all people—both Israeli and Palestinian—and I believe in finding a way to live with one another in peace,” Azar said.

Azar, the wife of a Lutheran pastor in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Jordan and the Holy Land (ELCJHL), is a mother who works outside the home. Thousands of women in the ELCA fit that description, but for a Palestinian woman in the occupied lands, this role is a challenge.

Together with her mother-in-law, Azar carries out “church work,” practices that are traditional in many places. The two lead women’s meetings every week at Lutheran Church of the Redeemer in Jerusalem’s Old City. They visit the sick and pray with them. They accompany their son and



Nah'la Azar

husband, Pastor Ibrahim Azar, as he brings Holy Communion to the homebound. They bring elderly members together for fellowship.

Some members of the congregation live in the ancient Old City and other neighborhoods of East Jerusalem. This part of the city was annexed by Israel in 1967, but Palestinians look forward to the day it can be the capital of their own state. Jerusalem residents are able to travel to the West Bank, but only with difficulty.

Other members live in neighborhoods that are increasingly cut off from the rest of the city by the separation wall Israel is building through Palestinian land.

Military checkpoints block Azar’s access to the people she serves at almost every turn. She prepares meals for the orphanages in Ramallah and Bethlehem. But traveling to the orphanages can take three to four hours if there is a long wait at one of the checkpoints. To attend a wedding in Ramallah,

The Evangelical Lutheran Church in Jordan & the Holy Land (ELCJHL) works with other Christian churches in the Holy Land and in partnership with the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America and other Lutheran church bodies and ecumenical organizations around the world. ELCA Global Mission provides a special fund for support of the five schools of the ELCJHL and a home for boys.

Praying for Peace

The ELCA Strategy for Engagement in Israel and Palestine encourages congregations' participation in the Ecumenical Prayer Vigil for Peace in the Middle East: www.pepm.org/PrayerVigil/PrayerVigilHome.htm.

Please join in an ecumenical prayer vigil for the Christian communities in Jerusalem, for all those who are suffering in the Holy Land, for Palestinians and Israelis, and for peace in the Middle East and the world. Sign up your congregation or organization as a vigil participant and get connected with others in your area participating in the vigil.

The vigil is coordinated by an ecumenical coalition, "Peaceful Ends through Peaceful Means: A Christian Witness for Peace in Israel and Palestine." Each state is assigned a date, and the vigil continues on the same day each month in each state until the violence in the Middle East ends and all can celebrate a just and lasting resolution to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict.

In addition to praying for peacemakers in Israel and Palestine, the World Council of Churches' Ecumenical Prayer Cycle (www.wcc-coe.org/wcc/news/01-02.html) requests you pray for people working for peace in the following countries: **Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, Syria, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar, United Arab Emirates, Oman, Yemen, Iran, Iraq, Cyprus, Greece, Turkey, Algeria, Libya, Morocco, Tunisia, Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, Sweden, Ireland, United Kingdom, Belgium, Luxembourg, Netherlands, Portugal, Spain, Italy, Malta**

Azar waited in line at the checkpoint for almost three hours.

Sunday morning is no easier for Redeemer's members. Worship is at nine o'clock, but people coming from nearby suburbs such as Beit Hanina are often held up at the checkpoint, arriving as the service is ending.

Families cannot be together for special events. It is almost impossible for the congregation to gather for celebrations. The restrictions on travel by Palestinians cut into what it means for the church to be community.

Every second Sunday in Advent, Azar and the women of the church hold a bazaar. It is hard work, but great fun. However, Israel frequently closes its checkpoints on holy days, blocking all access to Jerusalem. Many Christians throughout the West Bank have been forbidden year after year to worship in Jerusalem on Good Friday or Easter.

One way Azar makes peace is to try to live out what her parents taught her: "to love others as Jesus loved us and not to hate our enemies, because they too are people loved by God."

Ann Hafften works as coordinator for Middle East networking for ELCA Global Mission, providing resources for prayer, education, and advocacy around Israel and Palestine concerns. Go to www.elca.org/middleeast to learn more. She is the editor of *Water from the Rock—Lutheran Voices from Palestine* (Augsburg Fortress, 2003). Ann has visited the Middle East 16 times since 1977.



GRACE NOTES

It's a Lifestyle

by Linda Post Bushkofsky

THE BILLBOARD READ, "IT'S NOT A RESOLUTION. IT'S a lifestyle." No, this wasn't an evangelism effort. It was an ad for beer.

I don't know whether that ad campaign sold more beer, but I do think that the billboard's message is an accurate description of the Christian life. Our faith is not just a series of resolutions. Christianity is a lifestyle—a way of living.

In Women of the ELCA, we have agreed to a particular lifestyle grounded in our Christian beliefs. We have said, through our constitution, that we will organize our lives together through 13 principles of organization (see Article III of

the churchwide constitution, www.womenoftheelca.org/about/churchwide.html). Now, the beginning of a new year, is a good time to re-examine our life together as a community of women.

The questions here are based on the principles of organization in Article III. They are appropriate for personal or corporate reflection at every expression of Women of the ELCA. Prayerful consideration of these questions can help all of us to live out our calling—our lifestyle—with intentionality and clarity.

Linda Post Bushkofsky is executive director of Women of the ELCA.

- Have you committed yourselves to full discipleship and oneness in Christ? How do you live out that discipleship each day?
- In your life and work together, do you affirm the worth of every woman?
- How are you proclaiming and practicing the inclusive unity that is ours through baptism into the life of Christ?
- Are you open to change in leadership, programming or unit organization? Do you allow flexibility to exist in positive tension with the need for good order? Or does order stifle change?
- Are you functioning interdependently with your synodical women's organization and the churchwide women's organization?
- Are the decisions of your unit reached through mutuality and interdependence, involving those affected by the decisions?
- Do your leaders practice interdependence and teamwork, striving to enable others to carry out their responsibilities?
- Do you effectively use the resources you hold as stewards? Are you holding money that could be used to serve those in need?
- How are you working toward wholeness in the church? Are you involved with women's groups in other denominations?
- Do you regard an anti-racist identity as an institutional asset? Do you actively seek full participation and shared power?

AMEN!

Freed to Be Generous

by Catherine Malotky

In just a few months, when the promise of another summer comes to fruition, we who live on the prairie will witness another miracle. Come July, sideoats grama, a grass native to the prairie that covers so much of the middle of the North American continent, will bloom. On one side of its stem, the seeds that are its reason for being will begin to form. From each tiny oat-like pre-seed sprouts the tiniest orange-red anther—just a wisp, but so beautiful. It is such surprising extravagance.

In the middle of winter, God, when most things are dormant even in warmer climates, remembering that little wisp of wild color brings a smile to my face. What made you think of it? This is a kindness you offer to us. It is a sure sign of your generosity.

There are so many things like this in the creation you fashioned. Yet the world you built is not benign. Last fall, we watched a hurricane's power upset our best-laid plans and communities and organizational prowess. Could we call Hurricane Katrina a sign of your generosity? For those who lost so much, the power of your creation was a danger, not a gift.

But when the acute pain of loss is past, we may also be able to see the way in which creation renews itself through such violent outbursts. Fire, tornado, hurricane, earthquake, blizzard, flood, drought—all of creation's disasters contribute to that renewal in the long run. Your generosity is complicated, God. So I can see why our forebears, many of whom battled the natural world for their very survival,

may have come to see you as a God of judgment, visiting wrath upon those with whom you were *not* pleased.

But I see in Jesus a redeemer, not so much a judge. In Jesus, I see the surprise of your generosity. He spoke to women. He ate with tax collectors and prostitutes. He healed on the Sabbath. And he faced a deadly mix of fear and ego and short-sightedness of both his friends and his enemies.

Just these things would have been sign enough, God, that generosity is part and parcel of who you are. And then the empty tomb as well? There is no stinginess there. Within three days of his death, you took the risk to bring him back again. The world that took his life had not changed much during those days. We will soon turn toward Jerusalem again. We will remember the story of how you raised him up, a triumph and seal of your generous spirit, and an eternal promise—hope for each of us.

In this hope, we can be bold. We can live lives surrounded by your generosity, freed from being stingy by your faithful promises. We can give in both subtle and powerful ways, as you have, knowing that there will always be you and your love. Now what might that mean for us today? Amen.

Catherine Malotky serves the ELCA Board of Pensions as retirement planning manager. An ordained pastor, she has also been an editor, teacher, parish pastor, and retreat leader.